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THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
JANE AUSTEN

EDITED BY
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Pomona College
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JOHN WILTSHIRE

Mansfield Park, Emma, Persuasion

When Jane Austen moved to Chawton cottage in 1809 she sent off a poem to her brother Francis that celebrates the occasion:

Our Chawton home – how much we find
 Already in it, to our mind,
 And how convinced, that when complete,
 It will all other Houses beat,
 That ever have been made or mended,
 With rooms concise or rooms distended.¹ (L 176)

It was at Chawton that Jane Austen, settled with her mother, sister, and friend, found the conditions that fostered the writing of three of her greatest novels. *Mansfield Park*, published in 1814, *Emma*, published in 1816, and *Persuasion*, published after Austen's death, in 1818, develop that complicating of a romantic narrative with social satire and psychological insight so characteristic of her earlier work. These novels also display a more intensified sense of the influence of place and environment on personality and action, a broader and more thoughtful social critique, and a much greater power of imagining her figures within the social and geographical spaces they inhabit. In the action of the novels that Jane Austen wrote at Chawton, communal, family, and physical settings – homes, houses, and, indeed, 'rooms concise or rooms distended' – play an important role.

When Anne Elliot, in the last completed book, moves from one house to another, she reflects that each is a 'little social commonwealth', that manners and topics vary with place, and this observation, too, is pertinent to a reading of these major texts. Anne comments to herself that it is incumbent on her to 'clothe her imagination' in her setting as much as possible (P 43). In this discussion of the three texts I shall take her lead and suggest how each of the novel's distinct physical and social worlds is a conceptual world too. I shall clothe my account as much as possible in each novel's particular qualities, and in discussing their distinctive worlds, I shall

relate these to the specific narrative techniques through which Austen brings these 'social commonwealths' into being.

MANSFIELD PARK

Mansfield Park was published only a year after *Pride and Prejudice*, but moving from one novel to the other the reader is keenly aware of a change of tone and atmosphere. Partly it is that *Mansfield Park* is evidently the work of an older, maturer, woman. The narrator is not an intrusive presence, by any means, but one who, while an insider of the world she depicts, can also see beyond it. 'Poor woman! she probably thought change of air might agree with many of her children', she remarks of the beleaguered Mrs. Price at the conclusion of chapter 1 (MP 11). It is a voice with a range of sympathy beyond the social commonwealth of rich families that is the milieu of *Mansfield Park*.

Almost everyone in this novel is wealthy. Sir Thomas Bertram is a Member of Parliament with a large estate and property in the West Indies; Henry Crawford also has an estate, and enough income easily to afford to have it totally 'improved' as soon as he comes of age. His sister Mary has twenty thousand. Mr. Rushworth has a park five miles round and a Tudor mansion. Told that Henry Crawford has 'four thousand a year', Mrs. Rushworth senior seems to feel that this is just enough to get by: 'Very well. – Those who have not more, must be satisfied with what they have' (118). These are 'young people of fortune', far better off than those in any other Austen novel, and untroubled, despite Sir Thomas' need to see to his Antigua estates, by any sense of financial insecurity. Only Mrs. Norris is obsessed with saving, a neurotic compensation for her inferior family position whose other manifestation is her remorseless bullying of her even poorer niece, Fanny Price. In part the novel is a study in the assumptions and manners of the very rich, in the manners of 'society', as the initial conversation between the Crawfords and the Bertrams, about 'coming out' (48–51), indicates. Spoilt, full of self-consequence, good-looking, healthy, the Bertrams do not need to be proud like Lady Catherine de Bourgh or Sir Walter Elliot. Their vanity is in such good order that they can appear free of it. Lordly, careless, insouciant, and selfish, Tom Bertram at least has some sense of humour.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the great estate of Pemberley is viewed by a visitor and outsider, and Elizabeth Bennet gives it all the awe and respect of one who can say only that she is 'a gentleman's daughter'. But in *Mansfield Park*, the reader is, so to speak, a resident, shown what it is like to live from day to day in such a place. The spaciousness of the house is an important factor in the lives and events that the novel traces, and much of Austen's

to his fiancée is a particularly delicious example of his skill, or damning evidence of his duplicity (depending on how one's sympathies lie). While we read the following scene from Emma's point of view, and are involved in Emma's responses – among them that characteristic shading of her hostility to Jane into pity and back again – the novelist is inviting the reader to step beyond her and to see it quite differently. That 'deedily occupied' raises the suspicion that the young occupants have just sprung into these innocent positions. Poor old Mrs. Bates has been as effectually blinded as Emma.³

Because of the confinement of focus to Emma, Frank Churchill is presented entirely dramatically and therefore enigmatically: is he appeasing or teasing Emma when he professes to take up all her suspicions regarding Jane Fairfax? How much is he being ironic at her expense when he says 'but I, simple I, saw nothing but the fact . . . I do not mean to say, however, that you might not have made discoveries' (218)? When he murmurs about 'conjecture' – 'aye, sometimes one conjectures right and sometimes one conjectures wrong' – what kind of adroit act is he performing? In retrospect, one might be sure that he's slyly implying the same criticisms of Emma that Mr. Knightley makes so forthrightly, but the reader, listening with Emma's ears, laps up the flattery that his words appear to proffer. Frank is not merely a manipulator: Austen's presentation allows one to detect his moments of bad conscience, of uneasiness at the game he is forced into, as well as his enjoyment of the game itself – 'Then I will speak the truth, and nothing suits me so well' (200). The reader is free to imagine that Frank is both sly and impetuous – that he is always straining against the restrictions of secrecy and at the same time enjoying the opportunities for mischief it presents. The enigmatic and mercurial nature of the character is a product of the technique of presentation adopted. For reasons best known to himself, Mr. Knightley does not think much of him.

Neither does Mr. Woodhouse. 'That young man is not quite the thing' (or: 'not what he ought to be'). Frank dares to break the Highbury habit of deference to Mr. Perry, and, even more scandalously, provokes Mr. Woodhouse into panic over open windows at the ball. 'Open the windows! . . . Nobody could be so imprudent! I never heard of such a thing. Dancing with open windows! I am sure neither your father nor Mrs Weston (poor Miss Taylor that was) would suffer it.' And Frank replies, 'Ah! sir – but a thoughtless young person will sometimes step behind a window-curtain, and throw up a sash without its being suspected. I have often known it done myself' (251–2). The reader may well enjoy this teasing, as with Mr. John Knightley's earlier and much less good-tempered taunts about the snow thick on the ground at Randalls.

Frank throws open windows in the novel in a more modern sense – the

opportunity of viewing the characters and events within a different ethic. If we laugh with him, we enjoy a temporary truce from the official morality of the novel's conceptual world. Frank presents the possibility of seeing things another way – one that allows much more to impetuosity and surprise, to passion and risk-taking. In this view Mr. Woodhouse would be seen as blocking the way, a man whose depressive fussiness inhibits and shuts down opportunities and possibilities of life, and Mr. Knightley's masculine rationality and rule-giving an attempt to contain and organize a world that is actually much more volatile. Yet since Emma's perspective is so much the novel's, the reader who takes out his or her freedom in Highbury undertakes to accept its consensus and thus declines to pursue these options or doubts.

Emma, of course, is completely unaware of the relationship between Frank and Jane. But her misunderstanding is deeper than this. What she misses in Frank and Jane's situation is a romantic element that simply is foreign to her sensibility. For Emma the arrival of the piano is simply a stimulus for further speculation about Mr. Dixon: the gift might have been a piece of jewellery (an amber cross?) for all the difference it makes. But the choice of the piano as a gift is not accidental. It becomes clear that Jane and Frank fell in love over music, and that music is important to Jane in a way that Emma cannot fully conceive. In this very scene Frank manages to say to Jane:

'I believe you were glad we danced no longer; but I would have given worlds – all the worlds one ever has to give – for another half hour.'

She played.

(242)

Jane speaks, in effect, through the piano. Her eloquence passes unheard by Emma. Later, preoccupied by thoughts about Mr. Knightley, she scarcely notices 'the sweet sounds of the united voices' of Frank and Jane singing in the background. Only through music does the community unwittingly sanction their intimacy. One is left to speculate that perhaps it is an insight into her confined circumstances and the need for an outlet that has motivated the gift of the piano, a gift 'thoroughly from the heart', attuned to the needs of the beloved, as Frank contrives to declare. Moreover, a piano is a symbol of culture and gentility – as the discussion at Mrs. Cole's brings out – and the present is a pledge on Frank's part of a future larger, more comprehensive in its cultural horizons, than the Bates' two rooms. When the engagement is broken off, and Jane faces a future as governess, Miss Bates reports her addressing the piano directly: 'Poor dear Jane was talking of it just now. "You must go", said she. "You and I must part. You will have no business here"' (384).